BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-9952 JANUARY 13, 1976
LINDA CASHDAN

THE HEALTH OF AMERICANS

ANNCR:

IN NINETEEN-SEVENTY-FOUR, CONGRESS PASSED A LAW REQUIRING THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE TO COMPILE A COMPREHENSIVE ANNUAL REPORT ON THE NATION'S HEALTH. THE RESULT: A MASSIVE THREE-VOLUME DOCUMENT ENTITLED "HEALTH, UNITED STATES, 1975." VOA'S LINDA CASHDAN HAS THIS REPORT:

VOICE:

THE SIX-HUNDRED PAGE STUDY INCLUDES HEALTH STATISTICS, MEDICAL COSTS, AND FIGURES ON POPULATION TRENDS -- A PARADE OF DETAILS THAT GIVE AN OVERVIEW OF HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE IN THE UNITED STATES AND OFFER A STARTING POINT FOR FUTURE POLICY-MAKING DECISIONS. THE REPORT SHOWS, FOR EXAMPLE, THAT AMERICANS AS A WHOLE ARE RECEIVING MORE MEDICAL CARE TODAY THAN THEY DID TEN YEARS AGO, AND THAT, DESPITE CONTINUING RISE IN MEDICAL COSTS, MORE POOR PEOPLE ARE GETTING HEALTH SERVICES THAN EVER BEFORE.

BUT THE REPORT DOES UNDERLINE INEQUITIES. POOR PEOPLE PAY A DISPROPORTIONATE SHARE OF THEIR INCOME FOR HEALTH SERVICES. NON-WHITE AMERICANS HAVE SHORTER LIFE EXPECTANCY THAN WHITE AMERICANS. AND, ALTHOUGH THE NUMBER OF DOCTORS HAS BEEN INCREASING FASTER THAN THE POPULATION AS A WHOLE, PHYSICIANS ARE UNEVENLY DISTRIBUTED ACROSS THE COUNTRY. AS A RESULT, THE REPORT POINTS OUT, NOT ALL AMERICANS HAVE EQUAL ACCESS TO MEDICAL CARE.

IRONICALLY, HOWEVER, THE REAL MESSAGE OF THIS FIRST ANNUAL UNITED STATES REPORT ON HEALTH IS NOT DIRECTED AT THE GOVERNMENT, BUT AT THE INDIVIDUAL. IT APPEARS THAT WHILE MODERN SCIENCE HAS BECOME MORE EFFECTIVE AT KEEPING PEOPLE ALIVE, MODERN MAN HAS INCREASED HIS ABILITY FOR SELF-DESTRUCTION. FOR EXAMPLE, WHILE BREAKTHROUGHS IN NEWBORN INFANT CARE, AND IMMUNIZATION AGAINST CHILDHOOD DISEASES, HAVE DRASTICALLY CUT DOWN INFANT AND CHILD MORTALITY RATES, THE REPORT SAYS THAT AUTOMOBILE ACCIDENTS HAVE BECOME AN INCREASING CAUSE OF DEATH AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE. AND WHILE ADVANCES IN HEART-DISEASE TREATMENT HAVE CUT DOWN THE DEATH RATE FROM THAT KILLER, THE DEATH RATE FROM CANCER HAS INCREASED. DOCTORS BELIEVE AIR POLLUTION AND CIGARETTE SMOKING MAY BE THE SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS PROBLEM. INDEED, ACCORDING TO THE REPORT, IN 1975 A HIGH PROPORTION OF SICKNESS IN THE UNITED STATES WAS CAUSED NOT BY DISEASE BUT BY LIFESTYLE -- EXCESSIVE USE OF TOBACCO, ALCOHOL, LACK OF EXERCISE AND IMPROPER DIET. AND TO BATTLE THAT KIND OF ILLNESS, PEOPLE MUST LOOK, NOT TO MODERN SCIENCE, NOR TO GOVERNMENT, BUT TO THE WAY THEY LIVE THEIR DAILY LIVES.

WJL/PBM